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SUBJECT Lie-Detector Tests for Government Employees

STEVE BELL: Congress began hearings today on proposed Administration regulations that would require lie-detector tests for government employees who handle classified information. Justice Department officials say there is just too much leaking. But many members of Congress worry that the restrictions may be too broad.

Richard Threlkeld has more on government leaks, a virtual art form in this city.

RICHARD THRELKELD: Frank Snapp is unemployed. He's an author who can't write a book or give a speech or teach a class without first clearing it with a government censor, ever, for the rest of his life. He used to be with the CIA, and he wrote a book critical of it without clearing it with the CIA censor, just in case he'd revealed some secrets. He didn't reveal any, but the Supreme Court decided he'd violated his agreement with the CIA and ordered him to turn over all his book and movie royalties, \$180,000, to the government. Now, he says, he feels like one of those South African dissidents -- banned.

FRANK SNEPP: When someone who cannot speak, talk, get a job because he's offended the regime, he's called banned. Well, that's what's happened to me.

THRELKELD: Last month the Reagan Administration started applying the Snapp rule to tens of thousands of Frank Snapps still in government, anybody with access to top secrets. They'll all have to take a pledge not to leak secrets and take a lie-detector test if they're suspected of it, and let the censors go over anything they ever write or say about their service.

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RICHARD WILLARD: We have had a problem of too much classified information leaking out, one way or another, some from negligence, some from deliberate disclosures.

THRELKELD: Mr. Willard, whose committee recommended the crackdown, insists the leaks have been damaging, but can't say exactly how. That's secret.

Certainly, there are a lot of national secrets that ought to stay that way. But which ones? There are an estimated 16 million national secrets. At one time, even the White House dinner menu was secret.

Strictly enforced, the no-leak rule would require a whole library of books by government movers and shakers, past and present, to go to the censor. It would require Walter Mondale, for one, to have his presidential campaign speeches censored.

Washington has always been a veritable sieve of leaks, and the most incorrigible leakers have been our Presidents. John Kennedy remarked that America is the only ship of state that leaks from the top. Just last month, Ronald Reagan leaked some pictures showing the Russians in Cuba and the Cubans in Nicaragua.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: These pictures only tell a small part of the story. I wish I could show you more without compromising our most sensitive intelligence sources and methods.

THRELKELD: And the way the White House figures it, from now on there'll only be one leak.

You can leak if the President wants to leak or the President says it's okay.

WILLARD: That's the President's authority in our system of government. And the only alternative to that would be to have anarchy, where every government employee could decide the question for himself.

THRELKELD: Mr. Willard points out that censorship victims can always take it to court. And besides, the censor is supposed to only X out the secrets, not honest criticism.

Frank Snapp is naturally skeptical.

SNEPP: The record of the CIA's enforcement of its secrecy agreements and secrecy regulations leads to no other conclusion. It's the critics who've been bludgeoned.

THRELKELD: The White House is hoping the Frank Snapp

story will scare enough bureaucrats that the no-leak rule won't have to be enforced. In fact, most leaks aren't treasonous, they're just embarrassing. They don't threaten the safety of the Republic, they just make running it a little tougher.

The Nixon White House hired some plumbers to try to plug its leaks. Apparently, the Nixon people didn't consider or didn't dare try the Reagan solution: turning off the tap.